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ABSTRACT

The human life course is examined so as to clarify the nature and meaning of age to members of different social classes at different periods of their lives. The author utilizes a developmental framework: life is made up of interlinked role sequences involving cumulative learning. Each stage builds on the previous one. Within this framework, the role possibilities and expectations for individuals at different ages are considered. Some, such as school age, have been codified in law. Others are based on normal maturation in children (e.g., the age for walking). Still others are derived from the nature of the economy and social organization (such as the "marrying" age). Some of the problems resulting from age stratification are pointed up. For example, failure to meet certain age-bound expectations can cause problems at a later age. Also, some age expectations are met more easily by members of one social class than by members of another. (TL)

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Age Stratification and the Individual*

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My primary aim in this paper will be to examine the life course for the light it throws on the nature and meaning of age for the individual member of a given cohort. The early growth and late decline of strength and power over the course of a life evokes the image of the "life cycle." Yet few individuals seem to experience their lives as cyclical in nature. True, physical strength and sexual power tend to diminish even in the middle years and mental acuity often drops off in the later years, but these declines are by no means comparable to the tremendous thrust of early development. In many respects, in fact, the individual may show continued development until extreme old age. There is not only continuity but also a continual unfolding of new possibilities almost to the very end.

Biological aging involves a number of interrelated processes of growth and maturation that are accompanied by differentials in the attainment of maturity and, much later, in the decline of optimum performance. The individual must adapt recurrently to the fact of his own development and aging both in terms of his changing capacities and attributes and in terms of the changing expectations others hold for him. Inevitably, aging also brings continual accretion of experiences that the individual draws upon in formulating who he is and where he is going. Beyond this, almost from the very start, aging brings the development of interests, abilities and goals

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that will influence an individual's choice among alternative paths that are open to him.

Parallel to biological aging, and largely setting the frame of reference within which the individual defines and redefines his goals and self-image, is the structure of expectations and relationships through which he sequentially passes. Certain possibilities exist for him as positions to be occupied, roles to be played. One role may link to another: college graduation makes possible admission to law school, and law school graduation makes possible a legal career. Conversely, failure in a given role may preclude the assumption of others. A life is made up of several subcycles of interlinked roles: student roles, family roles, career roles, community roles.

Within any given segment of the social structure, at a given point in historical time, there are reasonably clear-cut expectations as to the age at which major role transitions should take place. Some of these expectations may, indeed, be codified in law, as in the prescribed age for entering school, the minimum age for leaving school, minimum ages for driving, drinking, making legally binding decisions and so on. Beyond these formally specified norms, there is a realm of informal, age-linked expectations covering the great bulk of the life span. They range from expectations based on normal maturation in children -- expected ages for walking, talking, toilet training, being helpful -- to expectations that are more largely derived from the nature of the economy and social organization, such as the ages at which men or women should marry, when a man should be set in his career, and so on. As Bernice Neugarten and her associates have pointed

out[1], these expectations form a kind of rough time-table or normally expectable life course for the average person. Is one on schedule, or has one moved ahead of, or dropped behind one's peers? To be sure, the individual is likely to have his own goals and his own schedule, but these will always be set with reference to prevailing norms. Being ahead of schedule in one area may offset being behind schedule in another, but the individual who falls markedly behind schedule in the assumption of major roles is likely to experience a good deal of discomfort. He is likely to feel disadvantaged vis-á-vis his on-schedule peers.

In assessing the impact of age stratification upon the individual we need to be aware of the interacting components whose vectors influence the trajectory of a human life -- genetic, physiological, psychological, ecological, social and cultural. What an individual is at any given time -- what goals he pursues, what meanings events have for him, how he relates to others, how others view him and how he views himself -- depends upon the complex sequence of interactions of these various components. We shall have to consider at very least: 1) the personal resources (inherent and developed) that the individual can command -- his capacities, abilities, appearance, health, temperament and the self that he forges out of all of these in the course of interacting with others; 2) the social matrix of sources of support and guidance that orients him to his world and assists him to cope with it; 3) the broader socio-cultural scene that sets the limits of the possible, or at least of the probable, for a person located at a given position in the social structure or in the sequence of cohorts subject to the effects of war, depression and major social changes; and 4) both as outcome and as

continual input, the individual's personal goals and the commitments or investments of effort that he makes in behalf of them. Aging brings changes in almost all of these components, some highly predictable and others more fortuitous.

Efforts to analyze the life course as a whole almost always entail either a sequence of developmental stages and dominant roles or a set of themes that serve both to epitomize the identity of the person at a given time and to indicate the nature of his changing orientations in time. Shakespeare's seven ages of man[2] and Erikson's eight stages of psychosocial development[3] are surely the best known formulations of the life course. Each tends to combine biological age with role incumbancy or social demands. Shakespeare's seven ages are a dramatic statement of the fact that persons change from one age level to the next in the images they evoke and in the selves they present to the world. One is a different person by virtue of changing physique, changing major social roles and changing participation in society. The prestige rankings entailed in age stratification are clearly manifest in Shakespeare's vignettes.

Erikson's concern is with the development of personality and especially of identity. He postulates a series of crises or critical problems that must be resolved in the course of development. Each defines a stage and at least potentially results in the attainment of a more mature level of functioning for the individual. Five and possibly six of Erikson's eight stages precede attainment of adult status. The seventh stage, maturity, brings concern with establishing and guiding the next generation and thus represents the individual at the top of the age hierarchy with reference to power and prestige. The final stage, old age, is seen as a period for

achieving and maintaining full integrity and wisdom or falling into despair. In a sense, then, it is a stage in which the individual must mobilize himself so that the loss of power and prestige in the larger society will not be devastating.

Erikson has addressed his attention to aspects of personality development and life experience that are almost universally salient to social functioning. They are problematic in that they must be achieved through socialization and personal coping. It is this fact, I believe, and not the sequence of stages in which Erikson has embedded his clinical insights, that has made his formulation so popular.

From a sociological perspective, stages are most usefully delineated in terms of major role transitions or changes in self-other relations. Within childhood and adolescence these transitions are closely linked with chronological age regardless of one's placement in the social structure; role transitions in the adult years are less sharply age linked and are differently patterned within the social structure, especially according to one's social class, ethnic background and occupation.

Chronological age is preeminently salient in infancy and childhood, yields somewhat to maturational age in adolescence, yields far more to role performance in the years of maturity, and increases again in salience as old age is attained. Perhaps the first question one asks about a very small child or a very old person whom one observes is: "How old is he?" Yet at the extremes it is really biological status rather than age <u>per se</u> that counts most, especially in old age. A well preserved 90-year-old will frequently outperform a feeble 70-year-old.

In infancy and early childhood the child's world is largely defined and controlled by his parents. Most young children are reasonably content with their parents, do not particularly wish to be older and tend to regard anyone who is substantially full grown as an adult. Relations with peers tend to be concentrated in a narrow age range; at eight or nine a difference of three years can enormously influence interests, capabilities and activities. For all the tendencies to age segregation, however, parents and siblings are the most significant others for the child pretty much through the latency period.

In pre-adolescence and early adolescence, peer relations become more salient. Physique seems to take on special importance at this period. Being muscular and strong counts for much more than being bright; somatotype has been found to exert a substantial influence on popularity in the junior high school years (or did, at least, for cohorts born in the 1920's and 30's).[4]

In mid-adolescence, differences in attainment of physical maturity complicate the meaning of chronological age. Early maturers may be comparable in their physical development to late maturers three or four years older. Early maturing boys are thus bigger, stronger and more physically capable than their age-mates who will mature later, and the early maturers develop a substantially greater sense of competence and self-confidence.[5] Moreover, personality differences noted in late adolescence persist into the middle years, with early maturers remaining more self-assured and also being perceived as more conventional and less expressive. We may note that early maturing tends to have quite different connotations for girls. The early maturing girl is likely to be ascribed the status of "sex object" and will be subject to pressures from older boys to participate in a world quite

different from that of later maturing peers.

In adolescence, the loci of control and initiative shift markedly. The activity patterns of infancy and childhood were closely related to maturational level and closely monitored by older socialization agents. The physical and mental capacities of the adolescent are, however, not appreciably less than those of the adult, and close monitoring is out of the question. Parents and teachers continue to exercise great influence in many spheres, but peer influence and self-directed activity increase enormously. Now demands for increased autonomy and personal rights are likely to mount faster than parents and other adults are willing to yield them. Age becomes for many adolescents a pervasive issue relating to the control of activities. As with other deprived groups, it is only when real gains in competence and power have been achieved that striving for full equality becomes intense.

In childhood and adolescence, most major social roles and activities tend either to be ascribed or to be thrust upon the individual by virtue of the decisions of others. Once legal maturity has been attained, one's status as an adult depends largely on role performance, and major roles are now assumed or achieved by individual choice and effort. Being legally of age merely means that one is old enough so that he is assumed to be able to make important choices for himself and to exercise the rights and powers of a responsible person. Other, closely related age norms and legal age limits protect the not-yet-adult individual from corruption or exploitation.

The exercise of major adult roles depends in part on prior preparation, and the best prepared individuals are often those who were not wholly engrossed in the peer culture of adolescence. For it is during adolescence that the sorting and selecting of individuals into alternative tracks -- largely on

the basis of academic accomplishment -- becomes clearly evident and increasingly less reversible.

In general, in contemporary America, the later a man completes his education and enters an occupation for which he has been preparing, the more fully will that occupation engage him for the rest of his active days. Conversely, the earlier he starts work, the less likely is his occupation to become his consuming life activity, largely, of course, because his work setting is less likely to offer the scope and opportunity for advancement that is afforded the more highly educated and therefore later entrant into the labor force. For many workers, the occupational career begins with a series of job shifts while seeking better pay, more congenial working conditions or an intrinsically more satisfying job. Initially, the young worker must expect to work under supervision of older men, but the very able young man may soon be treated as the equal of his elders. In large bureaucracies, however, job level tends to recapitulate age stratification.

Those who in adolescence railed against parental restrictions and the authority of adults seem frequently to have "authority problems" on the job, often well into the middle years. Is it too far fetched to suggest that authority problems are, in their origins, as much a matter of response to age stratification as to the peculiar authority of the father? At least the two are inseparable.

Age is, of course, a major frame of reference for assessing one's standing in his occupation. During the early years of his career, a man's aspirations may be his primary referent, but his aspirations must often be adjusted once he has gotten some distance on a particular track. Even in management positions, most men do not expect to go all the way to the top,

and as they advance in years their self-evaluations are more frequently anchored in the progress made from the beginning of their careers than in determination to reach the top. By age 45, they tend to be strongly anchored downward.[6]

The man who works with his hands knows what his ceiling is likely to be and he is likely to reach that ceiling by his 40's, though his pay may continue to rise because of seniority. In managerial and professional jobs, by contrast, one may just be getting well established by his early 40's. Quite different age norms apply.

For most men, entrance into the world of work is separated from marriage by only a few years. The interlocking of work, family and consumer cycles has consequences for each. The early months of marriage are likely to be a high point in personal satisfaction, and such satisfaction may be enhanced by the arrival of children, but pressures also mount rapidly. As the full rewards of maturity become accessible, the individual's own commitments begin to cut down the autonomy and freedom that had at last been attained.

The timing of marriage is especially significant for women. Very early marriage often stems from tension-laden relations with parents; it is an escape from childhood, but one that does not make for an easy transition to adulthood. Deferring marriage indefinitely, on the other hand, may mean that a woman has markedly diminished her chances of finding an appropriate husband who is roughly her own age.[7] How late a woman is willing to be will depend on how badly she wants to pursue other goals. In a sense she is faced with a dilemma somewhat akin to that of the man who hasn't yet found the right job after trying many. At some point he

realizes that if he is going to be even modestly successful he is going to have to stay put. The man who is still searching at age 40 is in deep trouble.

One of the most onerous aspects of age stratification for the individual relates to the imposition of age ceilings. The late bloomer who wants to go to college may be able to get in, but a scholarship is most unlikely. Even a very promising graduate student is unlikely to receive a fellowship at 36. And the 50-year-old without a job is painfully aware that he is regarded as too old unless he has skills that are in demand. Academics have recently learned that once they are over 30 they lose their credibility for at least some of their students, though this doesn't yet seem to be a firm ceiling, if only because so many of the early cohorts of disillusioned students are now over 30.

Age ceilings are obviously harder to live with than minimum ages, since the young merely need to survive to achieve a measure of upward mobility. Once one is counted out of some activity or role because of age, one can only fight to change the ceiling or shift one's goals.

A fascinating topic that I can only touch upon is the human's proclivity to reconstruct retrospectively the events of his life. Identities are sustained in part by reshaping, in the memory, the meaning of prior developments in terms of current relationships, beliefs and commitments. In the years of childhood and adolescence, individuals largely rehearse and respond to the assessments (criticisms) of their elders. They review episodes, but one hesitates to speak of a "life review" until identity has been firmly established.

In the early adult years, life reviews are perhaps most often a

consequence of serious discrepancies between one's life situation and one's goals and aspirations. Systematic stock-taking will often occur when one has fallen below expectations, especially one's own expectations as formed after the individual has become responsible for himself. In the later years, reminiscences and life reviews serve to preserve an identity that can no longer be fully validated in the present.[8] Lacking roles that bring respect and admiration, and lacking goals toward which he can strive, the very old person invokes the past to remind himself and his listeners that his life was meaningful and that his identity, retained, is worthy of respect.

In our longitudinal research, we have asked our subjects, at age 40, to review their lives, year by year, graphing the high and low points from 0, "rock bottom," to 9, "absolute tops." There is great variation in the reconstruction achieved. Some cover the full range of possible ratings while others show only minor variation from year to year. When average ratings are plotted, they reveal that early childhood tends to be seen as happier than adolescence, but not quite as happy as the early years of marriage. Adolescence is rated especially low by the women. The high points of early adulthood are most often marriage and birth of the first child, though for men the first clear indications of career success are almost as frequently cited as the reason for life approaching "absolute tops." Interviewed at age 50, a substantial number report the 40's as the best period of life. There is, then, some evidence that the years of greatest power are the most satisfying years. I might add, parenthetically, that we find little evidence of a mid-life crisis, but considerable evidence of a degree of reorientation as the 50's are attained.

In summary and conclusion, a life is made up of interlinked role sequences involving cumulative learning, so that to a significant degree each level of accomplishment is prerequisite to the next. Aging frequently compounds the consequences of earlier inequalities of opportunity. Lack of relevant preparation at the appropriate life stage closes off access to roles that might be potentially available at a later stage. Premature commitments may likewise close off opportunities, simply because the person has already invested all of himself. But for that matter, any choice precludes something else and one never knows for sure whether he has chosen wisely. But one must choose, and one must then live with one's choices. Perhaps the acceptance of one's own life course entails a comment like that attributed to George Bernard Shaw in response to Isadora Duncan's statement that she accepted the universe. "By God," said Shaw, "she had better."

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